

Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital. MATTHEW T. HUBER. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013. Pp. xxi+253, 27 b&w photos, 3 tables, index, \$25.00 paper. ISBN 978-0-8166-7785-6, \$75.00 cloth ISBN 978-0-8166-7784-9

Despite being the second word in the title, the subject of Matthew T. Huber's book is not oil itself, but rather the American society that is built around and runs on oil, hence the name *Lifeblood*. Just like oil is used to power cars, Huber uses oil as a vehicle to understand the creation of the American society and the American dream. In his own words: "This book centers upon oil and the role of energy in shaping a particular regime of mass consumption" (p. xviii). In order to do that, he examines four distinct periods in the long-term development of petro-capitalism in the United States: overproduction and collapsing prices in the 1930s, the era of stable and cheap-enough oil between 1945 and 1973, and the oil crises in the 1970s and 2000s.

Those who are looking for an overview of American oil production and consumption, or energy use in general are advised to look elsewhere, for example Michael J. Graetz's *The End of Energy: The Unmaking of America's Environment, Security, and Independence* (2011), which by the way would complement *Lifeblood* wonderfully.

Essentially the book describes how ill-suited the American dream, as it was built under times of cheap oil, is for times of expensive oil and the current time with the need to cut down our consumption of fossil fuels to combat climate change. I do not buy Huber's claim "that oil's relation to the "American way of life" is central to the rise of neoliberal hegemony in the United States" (p. xv). For sure; the "American way of life" would be much different without the mobility provided by oil. But is it enough to explain the rise of a particular form economic and political ideology? In a simplified way, the argument is the following: mobility provided by cheap oil allows the creation of mostly white suburbs fostering petite bourgeois strata of mostly white suburban homeowners increasingly distrustful of high taxes, the public sector and redistribution of wealth.

For sure cheap oil explains the fact that the United States consumed in 2010 over one fifth of the total world consumption of oil, double that of the second biggest consumer, China. "Overall, 71 percent of U.S. petroleum consumption goes toward transportation, and 93 percent of all energy consumed in transportation comes from petroleum" (p. ix). Considering how important a role oil plays in the American society, it is interesting to read how difficult it is to get its price right. Whatever the price of oil, it always seems to be wrong. For example, in the 1930s the main worry was that the price of oil was too low, as in some parts of Texas, oil was selling for as little as \$0.02 per barrel. Fearing the prospect of violent revolt, the governor of Texas, former oil executive Ross Sterling, declared martial law in the East Texas fields, and four thousand troops were sent to enforce the field's "allowable level of production as dictated by the state's conservation authority" (p. 49). Quite a contrast to events decades later, when prices skyrocketed following the OPEC oil embargo or several instances where troops were deployed to oil-producing countries in order to keep the oil production undisturbed.

To be honest, I first had difficulties cutting through the Marxian jargon in the beginning of the book, but the readability increases as the book proceeds, as well as the interest of the content. My efforts were rewarded in the concluding chapter: *Energizing Freedom*, with Huber's insightful questioning of linking oil to freedom. "I found it quite ironic that a gas station could have the audacity to proclaim itself a site of freedom, with all oil's associations with various forms of unfreedoms – war, despotic petro-states, and social and environmental injustice along the commodity chain" (p. 155). Huber leaves the reader on the last pages of the book with the question: What kind of energy for what kind of freedom? Unfortunately, he does not answer this very crucial question. While I opened this review by criticizing his far-flung claims, here I would

have hoped for some visions. This is not to criticize the book, the first step in finding a cure, is having a diagnosis. Huber for sure provides one diagnosis. You might not agree with it, but for sure it raises thoughts.

Personally, after reading a book whose main content is to describe the large contribution the American notion of freedom has had in creating the current climate crisis, I started to wonder whether this same powerful notion of freedom could be turned into a solution of the same problem. What if the middle class consumer would use its purchasing power to buy electric cars, freeing them from queues at the gasoline pump forever? What if city planners and authorities would re-create walkable and bike-friendly communities with good access to public transportation, providing freedom also to those who cannot afford buying a car, as suggested in *Transport Beyond Oil: Policy Choices for a Multimodal Future* (2013)?

Huber is criticizing the return to “localization” as the solution to our energy and climate predicament for not only being based on a romantic nostalgia for a preindustrial age of small-scale agriculture but also for naïvely downplaying the extent to which modern society is fundamentally entangled within fossil-fuel forms of globalized production. But what if American farmers would reframe the notion of freedom as a freedom from imported oil, and would power their tractors with biogas produced from agricultural waste, while the remaining product would serve as an effective fertilizer freeing them from energy-intensive nitrogen fertilizer?

Jan Kunnas
University of Turku, Finland